

Who still remembers details of World War II?

Recollecting the past will allow young Singaporeans to be better prepared for an uncertain future.

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When did World War II happen?

In a recent survey of 500 adults aged 18 to 45 in Singapore, one in 10 did not know when World War II took place. Some said the war happened in the 1800s, while others believed it occurred in more recent history.

In a separate study, we asked visitors of all ages to the National Gallery Singapore if they knew where Japanese forces had formally surrendered at the end of World War II. The surrender ceremony took place on Sept 12, 1945, in the former Municipal Building, later renamed City Hall, where the Gallery is now housed. It marked the end of the Japanese Occupation and was so momentous that in subsequent years, Victory Day was celebrated as a public holiday until Singapore became independent.

Despite its historical significance, eight in 10 did not know where it took place.

FORGETTING A GLOBAL TREND

That details of World War II are starting to get fuzzy for many people is unsurprising. In 2024, one rarely hears first-hand accounts of those who lived through the war. Only about 23,700 of Singaporeans aged over 90 remain alive.

Across the globe, memories of the war are similarly eroding as generations with no living relatives or direct connection to that era grow up. Surveys of youth worldwide echo the results from Singapore.

In a poll of 11,000 Americans under 40, one in 10 reported not having heard the word “Holocaust” before. In another of 1,200 American teenagers, one in five did not know which countries fought in World War II.

Some contend remembering such details of World War II does not matter, since the war occurred eight decades ago. But the lack of knowledge could underscore a deeper issue – a lack of appreciation of our vulnerabilities as a country.

OUR TOTAL DEFENCE

To be sure, Singapore has evolved

our commemoration of World War II to preserve cultural memory and reinforce social support for defence.

In the early years, memorials were established to remember those who perished. The Kranji War Memorial is dedicated to Allied soldiers, while the Civilian War Memorial commemorates civilians. On Feb 15 each year, a War Memorial Service is also held to mark the fall of Singapore. These initiatives emphasise the theme of remembrance, marking the past through monuments and traditions.

From 1984, Singapore’s commemoration of World War II shifted when Total Defence Day was introduced.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the past, Total Defence Day, on Feb 15 every year, is forward-looking.

Now in its 40th year, Total Defence Day highlights the six pillars of Singapore’s strategy: military, civil, economic, social, psychological and digital defence.

Each year, Singaporeans are reminded of practical steps they can take to ensure they are ready for crises. They can acquire skills such as first aid (for civil defence) or learn to avoid Internet scams (for digital defence). These are contingency plans for the future, seeking to prepare Singaporeans for potential national security crises ahead.

REMEMBERING IS CENTRAL TO OUR IDENTITY AS A NATION

Yet looking back towards history can provide a moral compass for the future. As philosopher George Santayana asserts: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

A mastery of history can prevent crises. Economists Robert Dimand and Robert Koehn argue that if policymakers and central bankers had learnt from the bubbles and crashes of the early 1900s, they might have been better equipped to identify and curb speculative behaviour, and therefore avert the subsequent financial crises in the 21st century. This, in turn, may have tempered the US housing bubble that led to the 2008 global financial crisis.

More broadly, psychological research has examined how the past is central to how we lead our everyday lives. For one thing,



The Total Defence Day commemoration event at Fort Canning Green in 2019. From 1984, Singapore’s commemoration of World War II shifted when Total Defence Day was introduced. Instead of focusing exclusively on the past, Total Defence Day, on Feb 15 every year, is forward-looking. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

memory creates conversation. One study estimates nearly half of our conversations recount stories from the past, and we tend to talk about the past twice as much as we talk about the future.

For countries, historical memory serves as the bedrock of national identity. When a person knows that he or she shares a past with others, this understanding can contribute to a sense of belonging. In one study of 22,708 adults from 40 countries, being able to name more historical events correlated with having a stronger national identity.

These scholarly findings bolster the case for Singapore to commemorate World War II history even after decades have passed.

ADAPTING HISTORICAL TRADITIONS TO A MODERN WORLD

While Singapore seeks to commemorate World War II in general, we should also consider how to adapt our methods specifically to resonate with the younger generation.

Tradition can be a double-edged sword. The Pew Research Centre assessed attitudes towards traditions in the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the United States. Across all countries surveyed, the majority of respondents believed that their countries would fare better if they were open to changes regarding their traditions.

In all countries except Germany, youth aged 18 to 29 were especially open towards change. This highlights shifting attitudes regarding traditions, and the need to adapt traditions to today’s context.

The findings suggest

commemorating World War II should bear in mind this need to adapt traditions and rituals. A Dutch study published in 2021 found that children benefited when they understood the meaning behind commemoration rituals, could imagine or visualise what happened, and were active participants.

Applying these principles, the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam created a virtual reality experience for visitors to enter the secret annexe where the family hid during World War II.

A growing number of war-time recipe books are also being published. This is another innovative way to approach history, allowing younger generations to recreate the World War II experience with their senses.

Through these novel methods, younger generations get to have a first-hand experiential understanding of World War II as events are brought to life. Rituals involving seeing, hearing or experiencing certain real-life situations build understanding of the context and reinforce lessons of World War II.

MAKING THE MOST OF TOTAL DEFENCE DAY

There are new opportunities to help the youth remember the lessons of World War II on Total Defence Day in 2024.

For the first time, Exercise SG Ready will be launched nationwide to simulate a real-life crisis. More than 500 schools and public buildings will face disruptions to their power, water, or food supplies.

When we spoke to primary and secondary school students about the exercise, they all groaned that their schools’ supplies would be disrupted. They complained

about the likely inconvenience, and asked if the school canteens would still sell their favourite snacks.

While students might complain about Exercise SG Ready, this simulated crisis offers powerful opportunities to remember World War II. Students would have the chance to walk in the shoes of previous generations, discovering the deep challenges they faced and gain a newfound appreciation not to take things for granted. The disruptions should urge the youth to reflect on national security, and consider how we might respond in a real-world crisis.

Eight decades after World War II, reflecting on the past remains a critical stepping stone to a peaceful future. To quote our founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew: “We meet to remember the men and women who were the hapless victims of one of the fires of history... It will help our children understand and remember what we have told them of this lesson we paid so bitterly to learn.”

Returning to the opening statistics, it is perhaps less important that the youth of today can memorise the dates and locations of World War II per se. Rather, through experiences such as Exercise SG Ready, our youth can understand and connect with the war-time lessons painfully learnt by our forefathers, and hence engage with the past with an eye on the future.

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